

IMPACTS OF PROMOTIONAL EXAM PROCESSES

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

As the progressive leaders of today's fire services, we need to be the role models and visionaries as future leaders of the fire service. We need to take stock in our most valuable assets, the employees. The employees make the service. The service can only be as good as the weakest link. If we do not take stock in our employees, to help them reach their greatest potential, we may miss or waste the greatest opportunities available to us as the managers today.

The problem was that many fire department's have traditionally promoted from either the good old boy club, or the best buddy system of promotion, whereby the best friend of the Fire Chief, or person responsible for promotions is promoted, without regard for the qualifications or abilities to perform in the position. The other method of promotion is the legal selection system, whereby the promotion selection process is governed entirely by laws, and again there is no consideration for the qualification or ability of the candidates.

The purpose of this applied research project was to evaluate the current methods of promotion processes being utilized in local suburban fire departments, to determine if the processes utilized are effective in promoting the best qualified and able candidates.

The descriptive method of research was used to make the determination. The research questions were:

1. Is the current system of promotions within the Riverside Fire Department effective?
2. What are nine other local suburban fire department's promotional processes?
3. Should the Riverside Fire Department make any changes to the current system of promotions?

The procedures used in this research project included literature research, a study of nine other local suburban fire departments, interviews, and a survey. The research was used to create a basis of the problem as well as potential solutions. After studying the research and information received, some conclusions can be drawn to aid the Riverside Fire Department in developing a written plan for future promotions within the Department, that will aid in the promotions of qualified and capable leaders for the Department.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	02
INTRODUCTION.....	04
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	05
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	08
PROCEDURES.....	13
RESULTS.....	14
DISCUSSION.....	17
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	18
REFERENCES.....	20
APPENDIX A.....	21

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important processes that occurs within any fire department is the promotional process, regardless of what position is being filled. “ Promotions within a Department are one of the most important functions the fire chief must administer” (The Fire Chief’s Handbook, 1995). The problem was, that in the Riverside Fire Department, there is no written and defined process or system for promotional exams or appointments. In order to develop a written solution for this problem, a study was completed to determine what other local area Fire Departments were doing in their respective Departments. The purpose of this study was to evaluate nine other local Departments to determine what their respective processes were, and to evaluate the results they have experienced with their respective processes.

The descriptive method of research was utilized to perform this evaluation, providing answers to the following questions:

1. Is the current system of promotions within the Riverside Fire Department effective?
2. What are nine other local suburban Fire Department’s promotional processes?
3. Should the Riverside Fire Department make any changes to the current system of promotions?

As a leader of our Department, I must insure that we develop the organization today, to be prepared to move the organization forward tomorrow. This is best accomplished by identifying leaders, and providing them the best opportunity to realize and reach their full potential. The conclusions drawn from this research project support the need for a written

promotional policy for the Riverside Fire Department. The information learned during the research process will be used to write the new policy.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The problem with the current system of promotions within the Riverside Fire Department, is that the only written guideline is the criteria which a candidate must possess to take the promotional exam for Lieutenant and Captain. There is no written policy or guideline for other ranks, or for the test processes involved. The Department is not full time, and is not governed by the State of Illinois Civil Service Code (Illinois State Statutes). In the past, since 1985, there have been no exams or test processes for any promotions. Promotions were done by the sitting Officers or the Chief making the decision about who was promoted to which rank, which might be considered the good old boy system of promotions. This has not necessarily been a problem in the organization. However, the promotions that were completed during these times, have been relatively without any controversy as competition for openings has been limited. Also, most employees at the time, felt as though the good old boy method of promotion was okay. All of the Officers involved in selecting a new promotional candidate had been promoted by the same criteria as those who they were selecting. This made the method seem acceptable. However, equity to all candidates was not prevalent. Today, there is clearly more competition, more eligible candidates, no clear choice for a vacancy, and no written policy or guideline to insure that whatever selection is made, is based upon a fair and established written process. Having personally been a long shot for the promotion to Lieutenant in 1989, fairness has always been a concern. There were some personality conflicts which existed, although professional qualifications were

ample. Although the promotion was given to me by the eventual unanimous selection of sitting Officers at the time, another individual could easily have been promoted, resulting in an unfair process of selection. Since that time, I have been promoted two more times, by selection of the Chief of the Department.

The lack of any written policy could lead to a feeling of unfairness. Today, there are several eligible candidates for the Lieutenant position, when a vacancy would become available. The current guideline stipulates (Riverside Fire Department SOG 510102.004) that to be eligible to participate in the promotional exam process, a candidate must have five years of experience with the Department, must be an Emergency Medical Technician Level Basic, and have completed the State of Illinois Advanced Firefighter Three Certification (State of Illinois, Office of the State Fire Marshal). Additionally, the candidate must complete five officer level training classes, within the first year of any promotion. The first year of promotion is considered a probationary appointment as an officer, which allows both the individual promoted and the Department an evaluation period, to be sure that both sides are certain the promotion is proper. The five classes are, Management I and II, Tactics and Strategy I, Fire Prevention Principles, and Instructor I. Each of these classes is forty hours in length. When these five classes are completed, the individual can apply for and be issued a State Certification as a Fire Officer I. The current written guideline for the Department requires the Fire Officer I certification within one year of appointment as a Lieutenant. Additionally, there are five more classes required to become a Captain. They are Management III and Management IV, Tactics and Strategy II, Fire Prevention Principles II, and Instructor II. Again, these five classes are required in the first year of appointment, also a probationary time, as a Captain. The final available

rank is the position of Assistant Chief. Candidates desiring to be promoted to this rank, must enroll in a Bachelor Degree in Fire Science or Management, or the State of Illinois Fire Officer III Certification, or the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy, within one year of appointment as Assistant Chief. All of these programs would provide a desirable level of training commensurate with the position of Assistant Chief.

The problem identified relates to the Strategic Management of Change course in that the promotional process should be identifying leaders, so that true leaders are being promoted into vacant positions. This could be a controversial change within the organization if not properly managed. The Riverside Fire Department needs to develop a written policy for the promotional process, to insure that any future promotions result in qualified candidates being selected and promoted, based upon a written system which is effective and fair.

This new system would provide not only equity to all candidates, but should separate qualified and less qualified candidates, so that effective leaders are selected and promoted. As the leaders of the Riverside Fire Department today, we must insure that we develop leaders for tomorrow. The promotional process is the first step in selecting and developing future Department leaders.

If a new written policy is not developed, the Department would possibly be promoting unqualified, or less qualified candidates to positions of leadership. This would be irresponsible and unprofessional.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The lack of written policy for promotions in the Riverside Fire Department lead me to immediately inquire what standards were available as a guide for a new system, as well as what other local suburban Fire Departments were doing for promotions. I began the research with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA STANDARD 1021). NFPA (NFPA 1021) states the desirable qualifications for Officers within a Fire Department, or more specifically for promotions. The Village of Riverside has not formally adopted this document into ordinance, so we are not bound to follow the document as written. However, it does provide some excellent direction from which to base selection criteria. The standard details specifically what a supervisor at each level should be capable of performing in order to hold the position. As the leading Fire Service standards development agency, NFPA helps our profession to maintain a certain level of service, regardless of whether we are fully paid, volunteer, or something in between.

In the City of New York, “candidates must now demonstrate to Civil Service that they not only know the duties and functions of the rank being tested but, they must show they can perform these duties as well” (Fire Department Promotional Tests, 1993). Many Department’s have struggled with legal challenges to their promotional policies. New York redefined their system to try to comply with Federal requirements. Most large metropolitan cities have done the same, for the same reasons. Consent decrees, equal employment opportunity laws and regulations, and other local and State laws and regulations, and previous litigation sometimes dictate promotional exam processes.

The Pleasantview Fire Protection District is a local suburban Fire Department studied in this research project. The Department was studied because it has amended its promotional processes in the recent past due to litigation. Pleasantview was sued by an employee for failing to utilize seniority in the promotional exam process (Cook County Circuit Court, Fisher v. Pleasantview Fire Protection District). At the time, their policy stated that promotions would be based upon a test process which excluded points for seniority. One employee took exception to the process as being in violation of the State Law (Illinois Compiled State Statutes 65 ILCS 5/10-2.1-15). The courts agreed and ordered a change to the promotion process.

The current system utilizes scores from written test batteries, peer review, supervisory evaluation, job related seniority, assessment center, oral test performance, and other job related criteria as determined by the District Board of Trustees (Pleasantview Fire Protection District Rules of the Board of Fire Commissioners, 1996). According to Pleasantview's Chief, Dan Hermes, "I am pleased with the current system and policy for promotions. The candidates have been working thru the processes and the eligibility lists have resulted in good candidates and leaders consistently placing at the top of the lists". Pleasantview is a Department which is governed by the State of Illinois Civil Service Code. However, the fact that the process utilized is providing good candidates and leaders at the top of the lists is important to acknowledge. This should be the mission and goal of any promotional exam.

During the past decade, promotional exams have introduced many new formats. "Technical knowledge test formats have been supplemented by performance based formats as well as tests for skills and abilities. The trend toward Alternative

Assessments testing will continue” (Fire Department Promotional Tests, 1993).

The Western Springs Fire Department responded to a request for information on their promotional exam processes. They were chosen because they are in close proximity to Riverside, and have a nearly identical rank structure. Also, their promotions are not driven by civil service laws or regulations. According to Deputy Chief Guderian, “ We do not currently have a written policy, but recently used a process to make several promotions and are overall very pleased with the outcome”. They used a system of an application process, a written test, a five year minimum length of service requirement, oral interviews, and time in grade calculation, to formulate an eligibility list.

The Brookfield Fire Department was chosen for participation in the study because the Village of Brookfield borders the Village of Riverside. The Brookfield Fire Chief, Chuck LaGreco referred all promotional process inquiries to the Village of Brookfield Board of Police and Fire Commissioners. The Village of Brookfield Board of Police and Fire Commissioners declined to participate in this study. They failed to return any phone calls or to reply to any written letters. Chief LaGreco did state, “ The Board of Fire and Police Commissioners handles all the promotions for the Department”. This would seem to indicate the Fire Department, more specifically the Fire Chief, has little or no influence in the selection of candidates and their subsequent promotions.

“No matter what type of evaluation tool your department is considering, always look at what is best for the organization. Don’t select a particular method simply because it’s the one you’ve always used, or attempt to follow the lead of another agency by trying something different” (American Fire Journal, August 1997).

The City of Tallahassee Fire Department conducted task analysis to arrive at a revised

promotional exam process. “ A task analysis is a detailed description of what goes into effective job performance for a particular position in your Department. The analysis is conducted through interviews, on site observation, committee verification of findings, and a survey of job incumbents “ (Fire Chief Magazine, October, 1990). These task analysis studies can assist in better defining the expectations of a particular position within a particular fire department. The better position definition should enable a better selection of a candidate for the position. “ Conducting a task analysis of your fire department can tailor promotional examinations to your specific department and geographical area to provide an accurate indication of applicant qualifications and to reduce potential legal challenges “ (Fire Chief Magazine, October, 1990).

Although the Village of Riverside Fire Department is primarily a paid on call fire department, it is a very professional organization. “ These individuals, who make up the vast majority of the U.S. fire service, must be selected, utilized, and rewarded properly in order to make an organization effective “ (ICMA Managing Fire Services pg 177, 1988). The Lyons Fire Department does not have a written policy at this time, according to Fire Chief Gordon Nord. The Department recently completed promotions. The Lieutenant promotion was done based upon an oral interview of the candidates by the sitting Officer’s of the Department. Candidates were given the option to videotape their interviews, to insure integrity to the process itself. There were six candidates, and five exercised the taping option. Once the interviews were completed, the candidates were placed on a list. The list was a consensus of the existing Officer’s ranking. That list was then given to the Chief of the Department, as advisement or consideration for the promotion. The person who was ranked number one was then promoted.

The Lyons Fire Department also had to fill a vacancy in the rank of Captain. This promotion was done by the Chief of the Department in addition to two Deputy Chiefs. The three Chiefs evaluated potential candidates and determined who they felt would be the best Captain, and subsequently promoted that individual. The selection was more or less based upon a process of elimination. Candidates were removed from consideration for various reasons, thus leaving only one individual to select to promote.

The McCook Fire Department does not have a written promotion policy according to Fire Chief Joseph Myrick. He stated they do have a title of Shift Commander, who is one of two persons on duty twenty four hours per day. This Shift Commander is in charge of the on duty crew. They are not currently considering any changes to their promotional processes.

The Hinsdale Fire Department does conduct civil service exams for officer positions, based upon a written process, according to Deputy Chief Mike Kelly. The process involves an application, an oral interview, which includes a scenario based exercise, a written exam, and a second interview. The candidate must achieve a cumulative score of seventy percent to place on the final eligibility list for promotion. The Village of Hinsdale recently made the change from a score of seventy percent in each phase of testing, to a cumulative score, to be sure that candidates who did not score well on written exams, were not removed from the testing process, until all scores were tabulated. Deputy Chief Kelly stated, "We are very pleased both with our current policy and the results of our testing".

The LaGrange Park Fire Department did complete promotions in the recent past, according to Lieutenant Steve Norvilas. They do not have a written policy, but did have a

process which included a written test, and an oral interview. Based upon these test results, candidates were promoted accordingly. Lieutenant Norvilas stated, “The LaGrange Park Fire Department membership felt that the test was both fair and effective”.

PROCEDURES

Definition of Terms

NFPA. National Fire Protection Association

ILCS Illinois Compiled Statutes

FF Firefighter

LT Lieutenant

CAPT Captain

A/C Assistant Chief

SOG Standard Operating Guideline

RFD Riverside Fire Department

IDOL Illinois Department of Labor

NFA National Fire Academy

LRC Learning Resource Center

V Versus

Assumptions and Limitations

This research project was limited by three factors. Time was a limitation, in that the project needed to be completed within six months of the date of the Strategic Management Of Change class completion (August, 2000). Data was another limitation in

that some of the fire departments included in the research did not respond to requests for information. The reasons they did not respond are not known. However, one could conclude that repeated requests for information, that remained unanswered, were not an oversight. The last limitation is the lack of a written guideline for promotional exams, published by a professional fire service organization. I was not able to locate any fire service organization that has published a promotional exam standard. NFPA 1021 is the only document I could locate, related to qualifications. However, it does not recommend or contain a test itself. Additionally, there are many books published which contain recommendations on how to prepare for a promotional exam.

Research Methodology

The research conducted in this project was the descriptive research method. The study originated with a search of the NFPA standards to determine if any written standard for Officers existed. Next, a search was completed at the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center, in August, 2000. The search of available literature was completed to determine what information any industry publications might provide in regard to promotional exams. Although there are articles on promotional processes, most are related to a specific Department's process, and not directly related to general processes or recommendations themselves. Next, information was learned from various books and publications related to the fire service.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Is the current system of promotions within the Riverside Fire Department effective?

The answer to this question is no. The fact that no written policy exists

indicates that a written policy is needed. The written policy would insure that all employees have an equitable opportunity to be promoted, based upon minimum written criteria. The stability added to the promotional process, by having a written policy, would assist the Department greatly, in both selecting candidates for promotions, as well as the actual promotional process itself. Although comparative to other local area fire departments, the Riverside Fire Department promotional system has been effective in selecting candidates in the past, it is not a written plan or policy currently. If the Department does not write a policy, the Department could find itself involved in litigation, or worse, employees with morale issues. Other local departments have processes, both written and not written, which have resulted in both good and bad results.

Research Question 2: What are other local suburban fire department's promotional processes?

Of the nine Departments which information was solicited, only seven returned responses.

Table of Responses to Inquiry

LaGrange FD	No Reply
LaGrange Park FD	Replied
Brookfield FD	Replied
Hinsdale FD	Replied
Lyons FD	Replied
McCook FD	Replied
Pleasantview Fire District	Replied
Forest View FD	No Reply
Western Springs FD	Replied

The respondents that replied provided details specific to what their Department had done for their last promotions. Only two Departments failed to be involved in providing

information to this research project. Some Departments have written policies, however, most do not have anything in writing until they go to conduct the promotional testing itself.

Table of Civil Service Departments

LaGrange FD	Civil Service
LaGrange Park FD	Not Civil Service
Brookfield FD	Civil Service
Hinsdale FD	Civil Service
Lyons FD	Not Civil Service
McCook FD	Not Civil Service
Pleasantview Fire District	Civil Service
Forest View FD	Not Civil Service
Western Springs FD	Not Civil Service

The fact that only four of the nine Departments surveyed were governed by the State of Illinois Civil Service Statutes may be one reason there are such differences in the promotional exam processes. The laws of the State of Illinois provide some legal requirements which must be incorporated into a promotional exam process.

Also, each department has a history of how their promotions were done in the past. In the case of Pleasantview, the change of the process was driven by a legal decision. The change however, resulted in an improved and more equitable system of promotion.

Research Question 3: Should the Riverside Fire Department make any changes to the current system of promotions?

Yes, the Riverside Fire Department needs to formally write a plan for future promotions. The plan can then be adopted as a policy. The new plan should include a written test, oral interview and or assessment center, optional videotaping to insure integrity to the process, credit for seniority on the Department, as well as merit for involvement within

the Department over the years of service.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that the published materials regarding promotions in the fire service indicate that the Riverside Fire Department is in need of a written plan for future promotions. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA 1021, 1997) clearly defines associated job responsibilities with each level of supervisor. Although this standard was not formally adopted by the Village of Riverside, it is still a document which might be used as a measuring device for our Department. The current department operating guideline (Riverside Fire Department SOG 510102.004) was a good starting point for developing future officers of the Department, but it only outlines requirements for consideration to be promoted. However, it does not outline the process itself. The study results indicate several local Departments do actually have written policies for promotions. In fact, of the respondents, many had some type of written policy. However, the majority of Departments studied do not have a formal written plan. This may be because they are not Civil Service positions, affected by the State law for promotions (65 ILCS 5/10-2.1-15). Although the Riverside Fire Department has been successful in the past with regard to promotions, it must be responsible in the future to be sure an equitable written system is developed and followed, which all employees will understand. This written policy will assist in setting a standard for promotions. The process that will be followed will help to separate less qualified, from the very qualified or unqualified, so that true leaders are being promoted in the future. According to Jeff Lytle, "Time on the job and a stack of certifications don't necessarily mean someone's ready to lead" (Fire Rescue Magazine, January 2001).

It is clear that the Riverside Fire Department has indeed been fortunate that previous promotions did not result in any litigation against the Village. The lack of a written policy could have resulted in a challenge to any appointments that had been made in the past. The interviews conducted provided a clear relation that promotional practices which involved multiple forms of testing, resulted in the best candidates being selected, and more importantly, the membership of the Departments thought the selection processes were equitable to all candidates. This is the most important aspect of the testing processes. If employees feel that the system is not fair, or is against them, morale will suffer. Also, employees could pursue legal options, which could result in expensive litigation, as well as associated costs. The American Management Association (American Management Association, January – October 2001) catalog offers an entire section of training on leadership itself, ranging from the least senior manager to the most elevated senior manager.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the research results, the Village of Riverside Fire Department should adopt a formal written promotional process/plan. The first step would be to provide a written plan to all the current officers to review, provide feedback, and finalize any warranted changes. Then the formal written plan can be adopted as policy, and dispersed to all employees.

The plan should begin with a written list of requirements for consideration of the position desired, along with a job description for each position on the Department. The next step would be to submit a written application for consideration of the position desired, once an opening is anticipated. The next step would be a written test, administered by the

Department to all promotional candidates. The next step would be to calculate a time in grade credit, a training attendance credit, and a response to incidents credit, an annual evaluation credit, and an administrative tasks credit. The last portion of the test process, would allow the Chief to assign a small amount of influence on the final list. Sometimes these are called Chief's points. This would allow a certain amount of persuasion to the final list, in the event that all other components are considered equal. In the event that two candidates are near equal in scoring, it should be the choice of the Chief who he will make part of the administrative team. These components would be used cumulatively, and would be used to develop a highest score to lowest score ranking of all the candidates. The overall best score would be the first candidate to be considered for the promotion or vacancy.

This would utilize all the different components available to measure one candidate versus another on an equitable basis. It awards seniority points, while also evaluating each candidate for who they are and how well they have served the organization over a period of time. It also requires a certain stated level of ability and education, without regard to personality. The oral interviews would be conducted by three Chief level Officers (not members of RFD), based upon information provided to the interview panel from the Department (RFD Department SOG's, Policies, and Ordinances).

Once this written plan is submitted to the current officers, it can be evaluated, adjusted or further defined as necessary, and would then become the Department promotional policy. Once adopted as the Department policy, it would be published and distributed to each employee, to insure that each employee was aware of the change.

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APPENDIX A

Date

Name of Chief

Name of Department

Department Address

Dear Chief _____;

The purpose of this letter is to request your assistance for an academic project I am working to complete.

I am studying promotional exams in the fire service. I am particularly interested in any methods, written procedures or policies your department may utilize. If you should have any written or printed criteria available, I would greatly appreciate a copy of the documents.

In the event that you do not currently have any written or printed documents, I would appreciate some time, at your convenience, to conduct an interview with you to learn any systems you may utilize.

Any assistance you may be able to provide to me would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Kevin Mulligan

Assistant Chief

Sent to:

LaGrange Park FD

LaGrange FD

Pleasantview Fire Protection District

Hinsdale FD

Brookfield FD

McCook FD

Lyons FD

Forest View FD

Western Springs FD